

“Another spirit, other thoughts, another colouring”: Performances of Race in Antonín Dvořák’s Symphony No. 9 *From the New World*

Nathaniel Sikand-Youngs

HJEAS

“The composers are all much the same as at home—brought up in the German School, but here and there, another spirit, other thoughts, another colouring flashes forth, in short, something Indian,” wrote Antonín Dvořák in a letter to his native Bohemia shortly after arriving in the United States in 1892 to serve as the director of the National Conservatory of Music in New York City (qtd. in Šourek 152-53). By the following year, the composer concluded that this indigenous and black music “must be the real foundation of any serious and original school of composition to be developed in the United States” (“Real Value of Negro Melodies” 28). This conviction formed the basis of his Ninth Symphony in E Minor *From the New World*, one of the most famous works in classical music, in which Dvořák incorporated his impressions of African American plantation songs and Native American melodies.¹ The work was thus conceived not only to evoke an American national identity, but also to represent black and indigenous peoples through imitations of their musical traditions. Dvořák himself described the symphony to *The New York Herald* on the day of its premiere as an attempt “to preserve, to translate into music, the spirit of a race as distinct in its national melodies or folk songs” (“Dvořák on His New Work” 11). Using musicological analysis to address the provocative political and cultural issues that this appropriation raises, I examine the “spirit of a race” contained in the symphony,² critiquing the composition’s recurring evocations of African Americans and Native Americans as exotic and primitive, while considering how classical music as a mode of expression nevertheless enables a sympathetic and humanized perception of these non-white peoples. I aim to show that the symphony *From the New World* is as much a performance of race and nation as notes on the staff.

The Ninth Symphony was by no means Dvořák’s only attempt to integrate African American or Native American music into an American school of composition, which his patron, the founder of the National Conservatory, Jeannette Thurber, expected him to create (Crawford 383). In Dvořák’s String Quartet No. 12 in F major (nicknamed *American*), and his String Quintet No. 3 in E-flat major, both of which were composed in the United States, the “signs of Indian influence” are evident, according to John Clapham (“Dvořák and the American Indian” 866-67). In 1893, Dvořák

opened the National Conservatory of Music to talented African American students. Michael Steinberg argues that this unprecedented support for non-white music stemmed from Dvořák's background "as a Bohemian citizen of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, a member therefore of a linguistically and culturally oppressed minority" (150). The contemporary reception of the Ninth Symphony underscores the boldness of Dvořák's advocacy of black and indigenous music; Jack Sullivan explains that such criticism ranged from "claim[s] there was nothing American in the symphony, to a grudging admission that an insignificant scrap or two of black or Indian music might lie buried in the work. The subtext of both reactions was a horror over even the possibility of such music inspiring a major symphony of such extraordinary popularity" (8).

Subsequent scholars, most notably Clapham and Michael Beckerman, have refuted such critical disregard for the multi-ethnic influences on the symphony by tracing the origins of numerous themes in the composition to black and Native traditions. This important academic work should form the foundation of more politically engaged analyses of how Dvořák constructs racialized identities of African Americans and Native Americans in the symphony, particularly through the evocations of the pastoral, allusions to the notion of the noble savage, and imitations of ethnic dances.

A most evident example of Dvořák's attempted inclusion of Native American and African American styles is the second, Largo (very slow) movement. A sweet, uncomplicated tonality, simple singing theme, and slow tempo all convey nature (Dvořák, Symphony No. 9 55-56).

The image displays a musical score for the opening of the Largo movement of Dvořák's Symphony No. 9. It features two staves: the top staff is for the Cor. ingl. (Cornet in G) and the bottom staff is for the Cl. in B (Clarinet in B). The music is written in a key signature of two flats (B-flat major or D-flat minor) and a common time signature. The score begins with a dynamic marking of *pp* (pianissimo) and includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings like *p* (piano) and *pp*. The notation is characterized by legato lines and gentle waves, reflecting the pastoral theme mentioned in the caption. There are also some performance instructions like "in B" and "a 2" visible in the score.

Ex. 1. The opening pastoral theme of the Largo; note the legato and gentle waves of *crescendo* and *diminuendo*, all of which evoke nature (Dvořák, Symphony No. 9 56).

As Beckerman summarizes, the movement's "primary material . . . employs the language of the classic pastoral" ("Dvořák's 'New World' Largo" 40). Yet, the composer's use of the pentatonic scale, which has three fewer notes than the octatonic scales most widely used in European classical music, infuses this pastoral character with "some kind of musical otherness, of voices and 'spirits' from outside the conventions of the late 19th century European symphony" (Service). Dvořák did indeed associate this harmony with African American and Native American music, stating that both used "a peculiar scale, caused by the absence of the fourth and seventh, or leading tone" in a typical major scale ("Dvořák on His New Work" 11). This particular pentatonic scale is *anhemitonic*: the interval between each note is a whole tone (or whole step)—there are no semitones (half-steps). Michael Pisani, however, points out that "many North American Indian repertoires do use pentatonic scales with semitones" (216), even though "Western settings of American Indian music favour the anhemitonic pentatonic" (217). Semitones broaden the pentatonic scale's possibilities for harmonic complexity, color, and expression; by remaining overwhelmingly anhemitonic, Western imitations of indigenous music correspond to the perception that such non-white traditions rely on "'primitive' scales and rhythms" (Pisani 146). Indeed, as Clapham argues, various styles of indigenous music went far beyond pentatonicism, with "songs rang[ing] from an Iroquois Thanksgiving Dance sung on a monotone to others that use entire diatonic scales, and even in some cases introduce chromaticism" ("Evolution" 170).

Although the scale is therefore woefully unrepresentative of the broad scope of indigenous music, it nevertheless appears that Dvořák intended the Largo, which uses the anhemitonic pentatonic, to be a portrayal of Native American peoples and cultures. Dvořák himself claimed to have "based [the Largo] upon [Henry Wadsworth] Longfellow's [The Song of] 'Hiawatha'" (1855), an epic poem about a Native American leader ("Dvořák on His New Work" 11). Beckerman also contends that the Largo and the following Scherzo movement are both "at least in part, tone poems based on . . . *Hiawatha*" ("Dvořák's 'New World' Largo" 37). Longfellow's portrayals of Native Americans, however, are rooted in the idea of the noble savage, which sentimentally casts indigenous peoples as innocent and primitive for the enjoyment of white audiences. Similarly, Dvořák's imitation of indigenous music does not represent Native peoples and cultures so much as it evokes a racialized caricature of them for the pleasure of white listeners. In the

prologue, Longfellow introduces the poem as though it were a story told by Native Americans, writing that

. . . the ballads of a people,
. . .
Speak in tones so plain and childlike,
Scarcely can the ear distinguish
Whether they are sung or spoken. (4)

Longfellow continues in the following section:

that in even savage bosoms
There are longings, yearnings, strivings,
. . .
Listen to this simple story
To this song of Hiawatha! (4-5)

The Largo shares Longfellow's evocation of romanticized nostalgia for a primitive, pastoral, yet innocent human existence. Beckerman draws parallels between *The Song of Hiawatha* and Dvořák's Largo, explaining that its "famous D [-flat] theme must represent the legend [of *Hiawatha*] itself. . . . [I]t seems to symbolize a kind of timeless tableau: something that happened long ago and far away. . . . [T]he pastoral language usually implies consonance and a sense of landscape" ("Dvořák's 'New World' Largo" 42). With its simplified imitation of indigenous music through the pentatonic scale, the Largo, like Longfellow's *Hiawatha* portrays Native Americans through the white conception of the noble savage.

Dvořák encountered Native American culture in 1892, when his patron, Thurber, took him to see "the Indian dances in Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show" (Clapham, "The Evolution" 167). In the assessment of Steinberg, however, Buffalo Bill offered a "dubious" representation of indigenous music (150) that was rooted in the idea of the noble savage. Dvořák's source material for Native American music was clearly already deeply ingrained with racialized conceptions of indigenous people and culture. Clapham speculates that "Dvořák, if he was able to see any accurate transcriptions of genuine Indian melodies . . ., formed a decidedly superficial idea of their nature and spirit" ("Evolution" 169). James Hepokoski is right in suggesting that the music's "lasting value for us today may be as a disturbingly provocative cultural 'text'" (688). When analytical inferences are supported by knowable compositional intentions and inspirations, we can see

how symphonic music is able to reinforce perceptions of non-European art forms as primitive and, in Edward W. Said's words, "aberrant, undeveloped, inferior" (*Orientalism* 300). Stunningly, Dvořák even claimed —entirely incorrectly—that "the music of the negroes and of the Indians was practically identical" ("Dvořák on his New Work" 11). In the same article, Dvořák remarked that "the music [of African Americans and Native Americans] bore a remarkable similarity to the national music of Scotland" (11). Dvořák based this observation on the recurring use of the Dorian scale, which he calls the "Scotch scale" in the article, indicating that his failure to differentiate the diverse musical traditions of African Americans from Native Americans was due to their non-classical styles rather than their non-white origins. As John Kerkering states, "[t]o Dvořák, these plantation songs are as plausibly Scottish or Greek as they are Negro or Indian" (134).

An evaluation of the racial politics of Dvořák's Ninth Symphony must consider the latent primitivism of the work in light of the aesthetic content of the music itself. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said uses the musical technique of contrapuntalism as a metaphor to understand the "formation of cultural identities," and claims that "no identity can ever exist by itself and without an array of opposites, negatives, and oppositions" (60). Applying his assertion to Giuseppe Verdi's *Aida*, an Italian opera set in Egypt, Said claims that "[a] full contrapuntal appreciation of *Aida* reveals a structure of reference and attitude . . . which can be read as leaving a set of ghostly notations in the opera's visual and musical text" (*Culture and Imperialism* 151). The politics and the aesthetics of a work (the "structure of reference and attitude") are intertwined, so any analysis of one must be framed in the examination of the other, as Ralph P. Locke urges (261-63).

A contrapuntalist reading of the Largo underscores the stark contrast between its sweet, charming musical character and the harsh and brutal treatment of African Americans and Native Americans at the time of its composition. Hepokoski argues that "while Longfellow and Dvořák were enthusiastically contemplating their conceptions of the American Indian as the noble-savage subject for a European-heroic or sentimentalized art, the actual historical reality of their chosen topic was quite different" (688). With the massacre at Wounded Knee in 1890, and the emergence of Jim Crow laws in the post-reconstruction southern states, the composer's effort to adapt indigenous and African American traditions into his own work without any attempt to represent their actual historical and social settings seems exploitative. Dvořák's support for the enrolment of black and indigenous students to the National Conservatory should prompt caution when

criticizing his conscientiousness, though one must be skeptical as to whether this policy would have actually permitted a meaningful artistic—and, therefore, social and historical—self-expression for these people. Despite its legacy of helping to establish an unprecedented interest among white people in Native cultures through classical music in the so-called “Indianist Movement” (Block 162-63), the symphony’s ignorance of the social conditions of non-white peoples in the United States puts great strain on the name that Dvořák gave it—*From the New World*. Instead, it is more accurate to consider the symphony as being *of*, not “from,” “the New World.”

In his description of the symphony, Dvořák consistently refers to capturing the “spirit” of a nation (“Real Value of Negro Melodies” 28; “Dvořák on His New Work” 11). Presumably, at the expense of a meaningful engagement with contemporary social concerns, Dvořák intended to articulate a general character, mythology, and identity of America. It is through this broad perspective that the symphony’s racial performativity must be examined. Yet, in order to do so, it is imperative to expand on Said’s conception of a postcolonial musicological approach. Said’s contrapuntal reading of *Aida* dealt primarily with its operatic narrative, aesthetic characteristics, and historical context (*Culture and Imperialism* 134-57), but cultural critics must also pay attention to musical form and structure, as Cameron Fae Bushnell (4-5) and Locke (261-63) acknowledge in recent scholarship. Using the sonata form,³ Dvořák weaves a tapestry of music entwined with racial identity. The two themes that comprise the second subject group of the exposition seem specifically to foreshadow the Largo. They both make use of the pentatonic tonality and, through a comparatively cheerful mood, that is, compared to the anger of the main theme, they evoke a pastoral character (Dvořák, Symphony No. 9 16; see Exs. 2 and 3). Indeed, the second theme of this subject is nearly identical with the African American spiritual “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” as Tibbets (351) and Steinberg (151) observe. It is unknown whether this was deliberate plagiarism, though Clapham suggests that the similarity was due to “a reminiscence of Dvořák’s, even if an unconscious one” (“The Evolution” 175). Regardless of the provenance of the tune, the “Swing Low” motif further parallels the musical exoticism to be found in the Largo. Prefiguring ideas and motifs to come later in a symphony is standard practice for an opening movement. The first theme of the second subject in particular, however, also more subtly conjures the mood of the third movement. With the *Allegro molto* tempo (fast, swifter than Allegro), and lively dotted rhythms, this opening of the second subject group evokes a sense of dance (see Ex. 2.). According to Dvořák, the third

movement was inspired by “the scene at the feast in ‘Hiawatha,’ where the Indians dance” (“Dvořák on His New Work” 11). Reinforcing the composer’s assertion, Beckerman offers a detailed formal analysis of how the third movement is based on Longfellow’s depiction of the Pau-Puk-Keewis’ dance (*New Worlds of Dvořák* 40-51).

Ex. 2. The first theme of the second subject in the exposition of the opening movement. The distinctive, short legato lines evoke a sense of dance, prefiguring the Scherzo. Dvořák also uses the flattened seventh degree, which was associated with African American and indigenous music alike (Dvořák, Symphony No. 9 16).

Ex. 3. The second theme of the second subject group, which closely resembles the black spiritual “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” (Dvořák, Symphony No. 9 20-21).

By simultaneously referring to *two* subsequent movements, the Largo and the Scherzo, the second subject group alludes to a general overarching idea in the symphony that transgresses individual musical themes and

motifs—that of Native American and African American music, cultures, and peoples. With the *musical* “opposite” of this second subject group being embodied in the violent, fragmented, brass-led phrasing of the main theme (as is Allegro-sonata convention), it follows that the other element of the *racial* binary of Native and African Americans—white European Americans—is also signified in the first subject (Dvořák, Symphony No. 9 47-54). This interpretation paints the sonata as being built upon conflicts of racial identity: a “white” first subject versus a “black” second subject group. Through the conventions of the sonata form, the exposition of the first movement evokes the cultural and aesthetic binaries from which race is constructed. “Blackness” only arises because it is perceived as the counterpart of “whiteness,” just as the image of the indigenous noble savage is painted only through the colors that contrast the vision of European “civilization.” As Said observes, “Greeks always require barbarians, and Europeans Africans, Orientals, etcetera” (*Culture and Imperialism* 60).

As is the premise of the sonata form, Dvořák establishes this binary so that he can then dismantle it, melding and juxtaposing the disparate constructs—both musical and racial—which were presented in the exposition. Structurally and thematically, this is achieved most clearly at the end of the movement. When recapitulating the third theme of the exposition (that which resembles “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot”), Dvořák shares the melody amongst the horns and then trumpets, including a *fortississimo* (with great force) roll on the timpani.

The image shows a musical score for four parts: VI.I, VI.II, VII.I, and VII.II. The music is in 3/4 time and features a triplet figure at the end of the theme. Dynamics include crescendos and fortissimo (f). The score is for Dvořák's Symphony No. 9, showing the recapitulation of the 'Swing Low, Sweet Chariot' motif.

Ex. 4. The “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” motif as it appears in the recapitulation. The triplet figure at the end of the theme is used to convert the pastoral playfulness of the original melody into the explosive energy of the coda, marked by the change in key at the end of this extract (Dvořák, Symphony No. 9 47).

The sweet, pastoral melody becomes infused with the sense of violence and anger of the main theme. Although it melds the “white” and “black” binaries of the exposition, the recapitulated third theme avoids celebration. Rather, its aesthetic—to draw again on Said and contrapuntalism—is tense and unnerving. The recapitulated theme is in the key of A-flat major, which is harmonically distant from the tonic (“home”) key of E minor. This tension is only heightened as the trumpets recite the theme a semi-tone higher in A major, creating a palpable tonal instability and, now in the dominant degree, a harmonic desire to resolve to the tonic (a perfect cadence, the strongest resolution in classical music). The subsequent musical energy propels the movement into the frenzied coda, a thunderous rendition of the main theme of the exposition, which functions as the culmination of the preceding sections of the sonata—the pentatonic otherness of the second subject group and the comparative “whiteness” of the first subject group.

By concluding the sonata and its various allusions to black and indigenous music with the energetic and powerful coda, Dvořák reflects how race operates in the United States, with the nation’s ethnic diversity being both culturally energizing and politically abrasive. In the nineteenth century alone, immigration helped to establish the US as a “land of opportunity,” while slavery—in part a product of societal conceptions of race—threatened to tear the nation apart in the Civil War. Alluding to this history solely through the intrinsically emotional frame of music, Dvořák communicates on an “abstract” and “intangible” level, which evokes Raymond Williams’s understanding of how an individual perceives the “structure of feeling” of a culture (64-65). The mood of frenzied excitement of the recapitulation leading to the coda is thus an eloquent reflection of the United States at the time, at least from Dvořák’s perspective: a nation brimming with the collective and conflicting energies of a multitude of peoples and cultures, nervously anticipating what the next century may bring.

The integration of white and non-white musical tropes occurs again in the third movement. As well as referencing the Native dance of Longfellow’s *Hiawatha*, Dvořák noticeably imitates the second movement of Beethoven’s 9th “Choral” Symphony (Beckerman, *New Worlds of Dvořák* 40, 42). Both movements are fast Scherzos (literally “joke,” playful, light-hearted music) in $\frac{3}{4}$ time; both begin with intense octaves descending in perfect fourth intervals—a “Beethovenian introduction” (Beckerman, *New Worlds of Dvořák* 42). Both follow a similar dynamic and thematic development, with

quiet *staccato* phrasing increasing in both volume and pitch to a chaotic climax (Dvořák, Symphony No. 9 73-77; Beethoven, *Symphony No. 9* 82-87). Dvořák's intertextual references to Longfellow and Beethoven serve two primary purposes. First, as with the recapitulation in the Allegro-sonata, to challenge the perception of an irreconcilable stylistic division between European and non-white art (albeit represented by Longfellow, a white writer): Dvořák even stated that "Beethoven's most charming scherzo is based upon what might now [in 1893] be considered a skillfully handled negro melody" ("Real Value of Negro Melodies" 28). Second, to present Native and African American musical traditions in a guise which is familiar to audiences accustomed to European classical music. From a solely artistic perspective, well-documented by the likes of Beckerman and Adrienne Fried Block, the intertextuality allows Dvořák to promote his vision of a racially-inclusive national music. Despite his intention, the political implications of these literary and musical influences are complex. For audiences of the late nineteenth century, Dvořák's portrayal of Native Americans and African Americans through the musical imagery of dance may well have been interpreted as derogatory and a confirmation of the imperialist hegemony of non-white peoples as "primitive." The association between dance and African Americans is particularly fraught. Blackface minstrelsy, one of the most popular American genres of the century, used dance as a way to ridicule black people as "inferior" and "stupid" (Chude-Sokei 117). The music of Stephen Foster, one of the most prominent writers of these minstrel songs, "made a strong impression on [Dvořák]," according to Steinberg (150).

The Scherzo's intertextuality of Beethoven highlights that the entire symphony—for Native Americans and African Americans—exemplifies what W. E. B. Du Bois describes as "the sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (8). The "eyes" through which the symphony views these peoples are consistently clouded by the social and racial distortions held by the composer, namely, primitivism. Most strikingly, the music is unable even to distinguish the distinct cultures of the two groups. Yet, through this lens, distorted as it may be, the symphony explores a range of character, color, and mood so diverse—from the ethereal melodies of the Largo, to the palpable exhilaration of the Allegro molto, and the ecstatic frenzy of the Scherzo—that its evocation of black and indigenous peoples and cultures is rooted as much in an experience of humanity as it is an impression of the exotic. In this regard, the symphony perhaps lived up to the most exciting potential that Dvořák saw in the diverse music of the country:

In the negro melodies of America I discover all that is needed for a great and noble school of music. They are pathetic, tender, passionate, melancholy, solemn, religious, bold, merry, gay or what you will. It is music that suits itself to any mood or any purpose. There is nothing in the whole range of composition that cannot be supplied with themes from this source.
(“Real Value of Negro Melodies” 28)

Dvořák seems to end the symphony determined to prove all of this to the audience. The final movement recalls every important preceding motif and theme, entwining these threads to shape the broadest stylistic pallet to be found anywhere in the work. It is a final demonstration of the composer’s ambition to diversify the characterizations of Native and African American peoples and cultures in the symphony. But, more broadly, it is a declaration of the unique capacity of music as an art form to humanize these peoples for otherwise unfamiliar and perhaps prejudiced audiences: harmony and counterpoint reflect the complexity of emotion, with different voices weaving in and out of dissonance with one another, at once sharing and contesting the space on the staff; form and structure both order and meld the themes of a work, shaping them into a narrative of experiences. Contrapuntal readings of these *musical* “structures of feeling” (Williams 64-65) help to reveal not only Dvořák’s impressions of Native and African American peoples, but also his broader understanding of the nation as he expressed it in this symphonic rendition of “the New World.”

University of East Anglia

Notes

This is a revised version of the essay that won the British Association of American Studies Ambassador’s Award for American Studies in 2016 in the category of Best Undergraduate Essay. I would like to acknowledge Thomas Ruys Smith, whose class inspired me to write on this subject. Any errors are my own.

¹ For this essay, “Native” with a capital “N” refers specifically to indigenous peoples, cultures, or art, whereas a lower case “n” more broadly describes a place of national origin, that is, “native music,” any music originating in the United States. “Native music” means indigenous music specifically.

² “Race” is a social construct, so this essay uses the term to refer to the categories through which society classifies people. As such, the essay does not enclose the term in quotation marks: the implication of quotation marks is already present in the way in which the term is defined.

³ In this instance, the sonata consists of an introduction; an *exposition*, comprising a first subject in the tonic key, followed by a contrasting second subject group, then a return to the first subject; the *development* section; a *recapitulation*, essentially a repeat of the exposition

but with a transition to the dominant chord; and a coda. For a more detailed definition, refer to Latham ed., *Oxford Dictionary of Musical Terms*.

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